SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM AND SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS

UNITB3.4

Each society has its own culturally and socially sanctioned explanation or range of explanations for phenomena such as illness, poverty, failure, success, violence crime,etc.

TEXTB3.4.1
V.Burr

Burr, V. (1996) An Introduction to Social Constructionism, London: Routledge pp. 2-5 (extracts)

There is no one feature which could be said to identify a social constructionist position. Instead, we might loosely group as social constructionist any approach which has at its foundation one or more of the following key assumptions (from Gergen 1985). You might think of these as something like 'things you would absolutely have to believe in order to be a social constructionist':

1 A critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge. Social constructionism insists that we take a critical stance towards our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world (including ourselves). It invites us to be critical of the idea that our observations of the world unproblematically yield its nature to us, to challenge the view that conventional knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased observation of the world. It is therefore in opposition to what are referred to as positivism and empiricism in traditional science – the assumptions that the nature of the world can be revealed by observation, and that what exists is what we perceive to exist. Social constructionism cautions us to be ever suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears to be. This means that the categories with which we as human beings apprehend the world do not necessarily refer to real divisions. For example, just because we think of some music as 'classical' and some as 'pop' does not mean we should assume that there is anything in the nature of the music itself that means it has to be divided up in that particular way...

DECONSTRUCTION: nothing is taken for granted, everything might be biased by culture, society (etc.)

1 Historical and cultural specificity
The ways in which we commonly understand the world, the categories and concepts we use, are historically and culturally specific. This means that all ways of understanding are historically and culturally relative. Not only are they specific to particular cultures and periods of history, they are seen as products of that culture and history, and are dependent upon the particular social and economic arrangements prevailing in that culture at that time. The particular forms of knowledge that abound in any culture are therefore artifacts of it, and we should not assume that our ways of understanding are necessarily any better (in terms of being any nearer the truth) than other ways.

Look at the world using cultural relativism.

1 Knowledgeissustainedbysocialprocesses

If our knowledge of the world, our common ways of understanding it, is not derived from the nature of the world as it really is, where does it come from? The social constructionist answer is that people construct it between them. It is through the daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated. Therefore social interaction of all kinds, and particularly language, is of great interest to social constructionists. The goings-on between people in the course of their everyday lives are seen as the practices during which our shared versions of knowledge are constructed. Therefore what we regard as 'truth' (which of course varies historically and cross-culturally), i.e. our current accepted ways of understanding the world, is a product not of objective observation of the world, but of the social processes and interactions in which people are constantly engaged with each other.

Any form of knowledge (language) is socially constructed.

2 Knowledge and social action go together

These 'negotiated' understandings could take a wide variety of different forms, and we can therefore talk of numerous possible 'social constructions' of the world. But each different construction also brings with it, or invites, a different kind of action from human beings.' For example, before the Temperance movement, drunks were seen as entirely responsible for their behaviour, and therefore blameworthy. A typical response was therefore imprisonment. However, there has been a move away from seeing drunkenness as a crime and towards thinking of it as a sickness, a kind of addiction.

From a different perspective to action. Social constructionism in intercultural communication.

DECONSTRUCTION: nothing is taken for granted, everything might be biased by culture, society (etc.) Look at the world using cultural relativism.

Any form of knowledge (language) is socially constructed.

From a different perspective to action. Social constructionism in intercultural communication.

TaskB3.4.2

WeconsideredinUnitB3.2howpeopleare'dividedup'inparticularways,inparticularaccordingto nationality,raceandgender.

➢Think of other ways in which the world and the people of the world are divided up. How many of these divisions are 'social constructs'?

TaskB3.4.3

Burr gives the example of how views of drunks and drunkenness are socially constructed, and how these social constructs have changed over time. She also talks of how 'typical responses' that have been made to drunks and drunkenness have also changed over time.

➢In a 'social group' you see yourself as a member of, how have the social constructions of the following people and issues changed over time?

- Gays/lesbianism and homosexuality.
- Divorcees/divorce.
- People who suffer from 'mental illness'/'mental illness'.
- Criminals/crime.

➢What have been 'typical responses' to these people and issues in your social group at different times?

➢What particular 'cultural representations' (in Sperber's understanding of the term) of the people and issues are currently widely distributed in your social group, and what do 'typical responses' currently consist of?

Commentary

For Van Dijk there is a close relationship between social representations and ideologies. ideologies are 'the basis of the social representations shared by members of agroup' (1998:8).

An important question concerning social representations is that of howfar the individual is bound by networks of social representations.

In the final unit in Section B we look at a very common division that has been made by social scientists and categorized 'cultures': the division between 'collectivism' and 'individualism'.
Triandis, H.C. (1995) Individualism and Collectivism, Boulder: Westview Press pp.1-2 (extracts)

In Brazil, a waiter brings one menu for four people and gives it to the 'senior' member of the group, who orders the same food for all.
In France, each member of the group orders a different entrée at a restaurant.
In India, a senior engineer is asked to move to New York, at a salary that is twenty-five times his salary in New Delhi, but he declines the opportunity.
In California, a senior engineer is asked to move to New York, at a salary that is 50 percent higher than his salary in Los Angeles, and he accepts.
On a street in Moscow, an older woman scolds a mother she does not know because she thinks the mother has not wrapped her child warmly enough.
In New York, a woman asks for help from passers-by to escape from the beatings that her boyfriend is giving her; but no one helps.
In Japan, a supervisor knows a great deal about the personal life of each subordinate and arranges for one of his subordinates to meet a nice girl he can marry.
In England, a subordinate does not mention to his supervisor that his father has just died.
In Germany, a man walks on the grass in a public park and is reprimanded by several passers-by.
In Illinois, a man marries a woman his parents disapprove of.
Task B3.5.1

In his book Triandis asks the question: 'What do the...incidents have in common?'

➢Can you see anything that any of the incidents [listed in Text B3.5.1] have in common with another/other of the incidents?

➢Can you provide explanations for what is said/done and what is not said/done by individuals in the ten incidents described?

➢What do you think the writer's purpose is in asking what the incidents have in common?

Now read Extract 2 of Text B3.5.1.

Extract 2

As we analyze episodes of this kind [listed in Text B3.5.1], we find that they can be explained by two constructs: collectivism and individualism. The odd-numbered episodes reflect an aspect of collectivism; the even-numbered ones an aspect of individualism. The fact that ten so diverse social behaviors can be explained by just two constructs indicates that the constructs are useful and powerful . . .

Collectivism may be initially defined as a social pattern consisting of closely linked individuals who see themselves as parts of one or more collectives (family, co-workers, tribe, nation); are primarily motivated by the norms of, and duties imposed by, those collectives; are willing to give priority to the goals of these collectives over their own personal goals; and emphasize their connectedness to members of these collectives.

A preliminary definition of individualism is a social pattern that consists of loosely linked individuals who view themselves as independent of collectives; are primarily motivated by their own preferences, needs, rights, and the contracts they have established with others; give priority to their personal goals over the goals of others; and emphasize rational analyses of the advantages and disadvantages to associating with others.

The reader will want some explanation of why the ten behaviors mentioned above
reflect these constructs. Brazil, India, Russia, and Japan are collectivist countries, thoughin different degrees. France, the United States, England, and Germany are individualisticcountries, also in different degrees. Nevertheless, one can find both collectivist andindividualistic elements in *all* these countries, in different combinations.
In Brazil, the waiter assumes that the senior member of the group will decide what toeat and that ultimately consuming the same food will intensify bonds among the membersof the group, whereas in France the waiter infers that each person has personalpreferences that must be respected.
In India, the engineer feels he must stay close to his parents and that New York is

simply too far. If his father were dying, it would be the engineer's duty to be at his bedsideand facilitate his passage to the other state. Under similar conditions in the United States,it is more likely that the parent would be placed in a nursing home. The parent and hisson have their own lives and are independent entities.
In Russia it is assumed that the whole community is responsible for child rearing.
If the parent is not doing an adequate job, an older person is responsible for upholdingcommunity standards. 'Putting one's nose in another person's business' is perfectlynatural and expected.
One's supervisor in Japan is often like a father, one who is obliged to attend to the
needs of his subordinates. Locating a suitable mate for a subordinate may be one of hisduties. In England, where individualism is quite intense, the death of a parent may beprivate information not to be shared with a supervisor. . . .
Germany, though overallindividualistic, is also collectivist in certain respects. The German episode is illustrativeof collectivist behavior. Walking on hard-to-grow grassy areas is a community concern,and witnesses to such 'deviant' behaviour may take action. In most cultures, people tryto marry a spouse that their parents find acceptable. However, in very individualisticentities like the United States, it is assumed that people are independent entities andcan marry someone regardless of parental disapproval. In individualist cultures marriageis an institution that only links two people and not their respective families. In collectivistcultures it links two families, in which case it is mandatory that the families find the mateacceptable. . . .
One of culture's most important aspects is 'unstated assumptions'. The assumption
that we are bound together into tight groups of interdependent individuals is fundamentalto collectivism. The assumption that we are independent entities, different and distantfrom our groups, is fundamental to individualism. If we look at the ten examples, wesee that such assumptions hold. The Brazilian waiter saw a group of interconnected individuals,with a 'senior' member who would order the food. The French waiter sawindividual preferences as unrelated to group influences. The Indian engineer saw himselflinked to his parents; the American engineer saw his parents as having a life of their own.The elderly Russian woman saw herself linked to the mother passing by; the New Yorkerssaw no ties to the woman asking for help. The Japanese supervisor saw himself linked tohis subordinates and thus felt that it was his duty to take care of their personal problems.
The English subordinate saw himself not linked at all to his supervisor, so the supervisorhad no inherent right to obtain private information. The German citizens saw themselveslinked to the community and felt a need to defend it from a person who broke the rules.The Illinois man saw himself as a discrete entity, only weakly linked to his parents.

Task B3.5.2

➢Look again at the descriptions of incidents 1, 2, 3 and 4 in Text B3.5.1.

➢Change 'Brazil' to France' in description 1, and 'France' to 'Brazil' in description
2. Also change 'India' and 'New Delhi' to 'California' and 'Los Angeles' in description
3, and 'California' and 'Los Angeles' to 'India' and 'New Delhi' in description
4.

➢Now that you have changed the descriptions, do you think that these incidents
could occur in the other places?

➢If you think they could occur in the other places, what implications does this have
in light of the points made in Text B3.5.1?